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ABSTRACT

Important steps for saving America's school system where at-risk students are fast becoming the new student majority are discussed. For example: 45% of all Mexican American and Puerto Rican youth never finish high school; illiteracy among minority students is as high as 40%; and between 1968 and 1986, the number of white children enrolled in public schools fell 16%. About 30% of the school population was minority in 1986. A Los Angeles (California) study shows as early as the first 2 weeks of first grade, students are categorized as fast or slow learners, and some who do not speak English are misdiagnosed. Once this decision is made, students in slow groups are educated quite differently. Minority students usually attend segregated schools with crowded classes and poor counseling. The impact of this crisis on higher education is enormous. High dropout rates greatly reduce the number of minority students qualified to enter college. Differential tracking in school leads many minority students to enroll in vocational, commercial, or general education programs. Higher eduction remains an unrealized dream for most minorities. Though college access is available via community colleges, fewer and fewer students are actually transferring out of them. Hope for the at-risk freshman depends on the amount that administrators, faculty, and counselors do to encourage, assist, and support them to survive the college experience. Faculty must take time to learn about minority cultures and must include minority perspectives in the classroom. They must set high expectations and help students reach them. Contains 8 references. (SM)

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The Lie and the Hope

Making Higher Education a Reality for At-Risk Students

by Laura I. Rendon

It seems
that our system
has been more willing to
cast doubt that
at-risk students
can learn
than to go through
the painful process
of rethinking
its values.

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Jaime Escalante says it takes *ganas*. Bill Bennett says it will take a revolution. Some state governors say it will take coordinated reform. Bill Cosby says it will take better teachers.

What all of these people are talking about is what it will take to save our nation's school system, where at-risk students are fast becoming the new student majority. Just consider these facts:

- Forty-five (45) percent of all Mexican American and Puerto Rican youth never finish high school.
- Of the 3.8 million 18-year-old Americans in 1988, fully 700,000 had dropped out of school and another 700,000 could not read their high school diploma.
- Illiteracy among minority students is as high as 40 percent. By the year 2000, minorities will make up a majority of the school population in ten states, including California, Texas, and New Mexico.
- Between 1968 and 1986, the number of white children enrolled in public schools fell 16 percent. But the number of blacks grew 5 percent and the number of Hispanics grew 103 percent[4,6,7].

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Overall, some 12 million blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and American Indians were enrolled in schools in 1986, close to 30 percent of the total school population. Kindergartens are already approximately one-third minority, and in many large cities much higher. Minority students are in the majority in all twenty five of the nation's largest school systems[4].

At-risk children reside mostly in urban centers, where high school dropout rates are quite high. For example, in New York City the Hispanic dropout rate is as high as 80 percent. The rate in Miami is 32 percent; Los Angeles, 50 percent[5]. High school dropout rates for blacks are exceedingly high in cities such as New York, Chicago, Detroit, and Atlanta. In Alaska, 54 percent of Alaskan Natives do not graduate from high school, and about 40

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Successful ITV

Richard W. Smith ["The Faded Promise of Instructional Television," March 1989], paints a vivid picture, [but] virtually all of his examples are from educational broadcast television. He paints ITV in general with a tar brush, probably due only to ETV. Consider some important contributions of ITV.

- ITV links more than forty-eight colleges of engineering with part-time graduate students at their job sites. Since 1964, these programs have awarded more than 4,500 M.S. degrees to adult students who completed all of their programs of study by ITV. Course enrollments today exceed 80,000.
- Each year thousands of engineering and technical professionals use videotape courseware from the Association for Media-Based Continuing Education for Engineers (AMCEE), a nonprofit consortium of thirty-three schools. The current catalog lists more than 550 courses.
- Created in 1984, the National Technological University, an effort of twenty-nine major engineering colleges, a subset of AMCEE members, delivers ITV instruction by satellite to more than 230 sites nationwide. More than 5,100 technical professionals have completed graduate courses in the first three years of operation; 45,000 participated in noncredit short courses and tutorials in 1988-1989.
- On-campus uses of ITV do often run into student resistance. But, one of the successful exceptions is a first-year course in accounting at Colorado State University. About 40 percent of the course comprises taped lectures of 20 to 30 minutes each produced in a studio. Graduate teaching assistants proctor the CATV-delivered lectures in classes of about 30 students each; the assistant serves as a tutor for the remainder of each 50-minute period. A printed study guide, which incorporates the lecture visuals, supplements the textbook. The mean grade of CSU students [trained in beginning accounting this way] on the norm-referenced Achievement Test, Level I, of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants is consistently in the top 25th percentile. Yet, a common student complaint is that "the presentations are somewhat dry and boring."

We would not protest at length if Mr. Smith had concluded: *Educational broadcast* "television appears to be one of those apparently wonderful ideas whose time never seems to come." Instructional television, however, is doing quite well, thank you. We think readers deserve to see the whole spectrum [that is] too often lumped into "ETV."

Lionel V. Baldwin
President
National Technological University

Charles Elliott
Director, Continuing Education
Purdue University

Telecourses are alive and well

The number of postsecondary institutions offering telecourses is not in decline as Smith indicates, but at an all-time high. Ms. Jinny Goldstein, director of the PBS Adult Learning Service (ALS), has stated that for the 1988-1989 academic year, more than 1,000 colleges and universities will license telecourses through ALS. Many more institutions offer telecourses but do not obtain licenses from ALS.

Further evidence of the extraordinary health of instructional television is current enrollments. Although there is no single comprehensive source of telecourse enrollments, . . . [t]elecourse licenses from ALS will enroll about 500,000 students in 1988-1989. Information provided by the ITC Telecourse Utilization Survey Project, publishers and telecourse producers, indicates that the actual number of telecourse enrollments will range between 900,000 and 1,000,000, with enrollments growing 15 percent annually.

Telecourses are not for all students. However, that telecourses are an effective instructional medium has been proved repeatedly through independent research over the past two decades. Also, beta tests [by] telecourse producers . . . have consistently shown that there are no significant differences in student learning when compared with equivalent on-campus classes.

Although telecourse enrollments through PBS stations may be at an all-time high, there are now an increasing number of alternative video delivery systems for postsecondary-level telecourses. For example, contrary to Smith's assertion, hundreds of institutions are relying on cable television as one of their main delivery systems. Perhaps more importantly, the ubiquitous presence of the VCR in the home allows students to tape programs . . . [and] institutions to provide videocassettes for student checkout.

Ron Brey
Chairperson, Research Committee
Instructional Telecommunications Consortium/AACJC

percent of American Indians do not[3].

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The crisis

As a participant in the Quality Education for Minorities Project, funded by the Carnegie Corporation, I am part of a fifteen-member National Resource Group that has sponsored hearings in major urban centers. The news we hear is that inner city schools are decayed—infected with drugs, violence, crime, and teachers who kill the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of minority students.

For example, in Los Angeles I heard a disturbing account of how minority students are educated in elementary schools. An educator noted that in California schools, a first-grade teacher decides, as early as the first two or three weeks of school, which students are fast and which are slow learners. This critical decision is made not on comprehensive assessment but on quick impression. Sometimes youngsters who do not speak English are misdiagnosed as learning disabled.

Once this decision is made, students in slow groups are educated quite differently. While fast groups get passages to read and opportunities to discuss, analyze, and write, kids in the slow group get ditto sheets. They circle letters on dittos; they spend their time coloring dittos. This insidious practice results in tracking—in funneling kids into or out of a quality education. By the twelfth grade, the slow group is three years behind in math and reading.

Furthermore, minority students usually attend segregated schools, characterized by crowded classes, poor counseling resources, teachers with fewer advanced degrees, and teachers with degrees from less-selective colleges.

The impact of the school crisis on higher education is enormous. First, high dropout rates greatly reduce the number of minority students qualified to enter college. Second, differential tracking in school leads many minority students to enroll in vocational, commercial, or general-education programs.

Third, those minority students who do manage to graduate from high school will usually have lower GPAs and achievement test scores. They become at-risk freshman students. And, fourth, because many of these students do not qualify for admission to four-year institutions, they are left with only one alternative to initiate a college-based education: the community college.

Higher education remains an unrealized dream for most minority students. Fewer blacks and Hispanics are going to college, in spite of an *increase* in high school minority enrollments. Conversely, more whites are attending college, despite an actual *decrease* in white student high school enrollments.

Also, very few minorities are transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions. In Los Angeles, I heard a state policymaker say, "Transfer is a state scandal, a major failure," and then note that only about 5 percent of all community college students transferred.

Next, senior institutions are graduating minuscule numbers of minority students. In the 1984-1985 academic year, Hispanics earned only 2.7 percent of all bachelor's degrees, blacks earned 5.9 percent, American Indians 4 percent, and Asians 2.6 percent. By comparison, whites earned 85 percent of all bachelor's degrees[8].

In short, it appears that higher education is having problems not only attracting minority students but keeping them in college.

Sure, part of the problem is related to the poor quality of the education they receive at early stages along the educational pipeline. But we also need to realize that lack of faculty role models, limited student/faculty interaction, lack of mechanisms to help students take advantage of services that promote academic and social integration, diminishing financial aid opportunities, and poor counseling also contribute to high attrition, particularly during the college freshman year.

The lie

I've heard more than a hundred people testify at the Carnegie Resource Group hearings. The statements of a very active, well-known community agent in Chicago particularly stand out in my mind. In a loud, forceful, and frustrated voice he said, "Most of us won't live long enough to see the system change. People in education are too dishonest to care. People in education lie."

As I reflected on the gentleman's statements, I was reminded of one of my favorite books. M. Scott Peck's *People of the Lie* is a fascinating, somewhat frightening analysis of human evil.

Conceptually, Peck characterizes evil as (1) *laziness*, an unwillingness to go through the effort involved in examining and critiquing our attitudes and values; (2) *scapegoating*, sacrificing others to preserve a self-image of

perfection, attacking others instead of our own failures; (3) *destructiveness,* hating and destroying life, usually in the name of righteousness; (4) *deception,* intensely desiring to appear good, but our goodness is pretense, our goodness is a lie; and (5) *narcissism,* intense pride that unrealistically denies our inherent sinfulness and imperfection.

Has our educational system been engaged in a lie? To a certain extent, I believe so. Turning education around, undertaking reform and making access meaningful, takes a great deal of hard work and effort. Yet, it seems that our system has been more willing to cast doubt that at-risk students can learn than to go through the painful process of rethinking its values. By proceeding blindly, as if nothing has changed, education lies to its students.

Our educational institutions, particularly higher education, like to perceive themselves as pillars of perfection. When something goes wrong with the system, it is easier to blame the victim for contaminating the system. In so doing, institutions practice scapegoating. They focus on the needs and deficiencies of students instead of facing up to the institution's own imperfections. Scapegoating is a form of what Ernesto Galarza called "institutional deviancy"[2].

Institutional deviancy may be seen when higher education begins to think more in terms of devices that perpetuate the institution rather than those that serve the interests of its students. Institutional deviancy occurs when students alone are seen as the root of a college's problems.

When institutions become deviant, they engage in a lie. When educational institutions kill the hope and spirit of students by failing to encourage and support at-risk students, they engage in destructiveness. When educational institutions preach the value of getting a good education, yet allow the excessive drainage of students throughout the educational pipeline, they are practicing deception. They are lying to students.

And when educational institutions cling to obsolete and outworn ideas not simply because it requires hard work to change them but because they cannot imagine that their views could be wrong, they engage in narcissism. They lie to themselves, and they lie to the students they were designed to serve.

In higher education, we need to think long and hard about our possible participation in the lie:

- When we blame high schools for not preparing students to do college-level work, yet do little or nothing to save schools, are we not lying to ourselves by believing that true reform can ever come about in the schools?
- When we say access is available for students to initiate a college career at a community college, yet we see fewer and fewer students actually transferring, are we not deceiving students?
- When we create affirmative action offices, yet see few departments actually hire minority faculty, do we really believe and support the notion of equal opportunity?
- When we raise college admissions standards but do little to develop mechanisms to help students reach those standards, do we really mean to increase institutional quality, or do we mean to use standards as new filters to exclude students from college?

No individual and no institution is infallible. All of us make mistakes. But we can learn from our mistakes. We can change ourselves. And we can change the system.

There are times when I become frustrated with what is happening in our schools and colleges. But even in my darkest moments, I remain optimistic because as a member of the Carnegie Resource Group I have heard testimony from people who have succeeded with at-risk students. I have seen evidence that hope is alive...

...in New York, where Eugene Lang's I Have a Dream Foundation keeps thousands of at-risk kids in school so they can go to college. The program proved mentoring works.

...in the South Bronx, where Felton Johnson, principal of Intermediate School 229, created an effective school with high retention where 85 percent of students now read at or above grade level.

...in San Antonio, where Manuel Berriozabal's Texas Prefreshman Engineering Program assists hundreds of students to acquire reasoning and problem-solving skills so they can participate in science and engineering programs.

...in California's Washington High School, where Principal George McKenna salvages at-risk students through discipline, structure, hard work, and love.

...at the Rockpoint Community School on a Navajo Reservation in New Mexico, where kids are not only graduating bilingual, bicultural, and bicognitive but passing at or above the national norm on the California Test of Basic Skills.

...in Atlanta at Rich's Academy, an award-winning partnership between Rich's Department Stores and the Atlanta public schools to help more black youngsters

graduate from high school.

. . .in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where Project Causa motivates and prepares students to enter science and engineering fields through a partnership between the University of Puerto Rico and the public schools. Project Causa boasts a 95 percent student retention rate, and 100 percent of those students go on to college.

. . .throughout the country in new partnerships involving businesses, schools, colleges, and universities in an effort to save at-risk students. Examples include the Boston Compact and the San Antonio Partnership Program.

. . .And there is great hope in Freshman Year Experience programs, which have the power to make higher education a reality for thousands of at-risk students.

The solution

What do at-risk freshman students want?

They want access to information about the costs, benefits, and consequences of going to college; access to financial aid opportunities; access to a quality educational experience where they can learn problem solving and critical thinking; access to career and social mobility.

At-risk freshmen want well-trained and concerned faculty who truly believe students can learn; faculty who will take the time to learn about minority culture and family; faculty who will include minority perspectives in the classroom; faculty who set high expectations and help students reach them.

There are times when I become frustrated with what is happening in our schools and colleges. But even in my darkest moments, I remain optimistic because I have seen evidence that hope is alive.

In short, hope for at-risk freshman students depends on the extent that faculty, administrators, and counselors do everything possible to encourage, assist, and support students to survive the college experience.

When Jesse Jackson said, "Keep hope alive," I believe he meant, "Let's not deceive people." Let's offer people real opportunities, real futures. Sure it takes *ganas*, better teachers, more money, and systemic change. But in the end it also takes our compassion, love, courage, and hope.

We have a choice. Each of us, at our own institutions, can participate in the lie or in the hope. Through hope we begin healing institutional deviancy. When we choose hope, we choose goodness. And through hope, we can defeat the lie. ∎

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